

26 April 2018

Hon. Dr David Clark
Minister of Health
Private Bag 18041
Parliament Buildings
Wellington 6160

Email: david.clark@parliament.govt.nz

Dear Minister

Re: Implementation of a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages as part of a suite of measures to improve child health especially child oral health

I am writing in my capacity as Chair of Capital & Coast District Health Board on behalf of the Board.

Our DHB has been concerned for some time now regarding rising obesity rates amongst NZ children with a third of NZ children having an unhealthy weight, and over 10% being obese. For the first time in history, NZ children could live shorter lives than their parents as a result of excess weight and obesity.

The burden of obesity and its impacts is greatest on our Pacific and Māori children and those from the deprived communities. We are equally concerned about the poor oral health of some groups of children in our population, including those under five and our Māori and Pacific kids. Our families are living in environments, and often with limited resources, which are not supportive of healthy lives.

Obesity is a major cause of increasing demand and rising costs, straining our hospitals and health services. The risk factors related to obesity can lead to chronic disease and/or limit a person's ability to work or take part in family and community activities. As a DHB, our efforts and resources are heavily invested in working with people whose health is already being adversely affected as a consequence of established lifestyle patterns. We are also seeing a significant rise in the number of children and young people with obesity related disease, including type 2 diabetes, and dental extractions for children under the age of five. This is not only distressing for the young person and their families but it is preventable and an avoidable cost to our public health system.

CCDHB does invest in a number of primary prevention activities including: Project Energize, a successful programme that reduces childhood obesity; Green Prescription, supporting individuals and families to make lifestyle changes, supporting oral health in schools; and a range of public health initiatives including water in schools. These are insufficient to mitigate the impacts of obesity and poor dental health in our communities.

The Board acknowledges and supports the policy direction your Government is following on this issue. We understand the difficulties with various lobby groups in this highly contentious space and would encourage you to be as proactive as possible, particularly in relation to sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs), including consideration of the introduction of a tax.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has recently stated there is clear evidence that taxes and subsidies influence purchasing behaviour and that this could be used to curb consumption of sugar-sweetened drinks and hence fight obesity and diabetes. WHO notes in a 2015 report titled *Fiscal Policies for Diet and Prevention of Non-communicable Diseases* that if retail prices of sugar-sweetened drinks are increased by 20 percent through taxation, there will be proportional drop in consumption.

An SSB tax is supported by the NZ dental profession, with the NZ Dental Association and partner organisations' *Consensus Statement - Sugary Drinks* calling for a tax on SSBs consistent with the WHO guidelines. In addition, the Australian Medical Association has recently publicised its support for a tax on SSBs and urged the Australian Government to act (<http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/advertising-banned-drinks-taxed-vending-machines-removed-doctors-plan-for-war-on-sugar-20180105-h0duw0.html>).

At its February 2018 Board meeting, that Capital and Coast Board agreed to:

- a) **Endorse** the introduction of a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs);
- b) **Write** to you and request that the Government move swiftly to implement a tax on SSBs, and strongly consider including artificially-sweetened beverages given that they are also harmful to oral health, as part of a wider set of measures to improve and protect child health;
- c) **Communicate** this position publicly and practically support the Government to develop and implement such a tax.

As a health system we touch the lives of many families and continue to identify and implement ways to support healthy communities. Your commitment to school based clinics and ensuring the strength of our health services will also assist us to support healthy communities and families. This would be more effective when the environment supports fewer unnecessary sugar-sweetened beverages and energy drinks.

Importantly, we also acknowledge that a tax such as we have suggested will impact on low-decile populations and we are prepared to support those populations with approaches that will assist in the efficacy of such a policy

I trust you will give this request serious consideration. I can assure you that the DHB will fully support you and the Government. Please do get in touch if we can assist in any way.

Yours sincerely



Andrew Blair
Chair
Capital & Coast District Health Board